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Why is everyone talking about climate change?

Why is everyone talking about climate change... again?

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Abstract: In this short article, I reflect on the last 50 years of environmental mobilisations in Europe and ask why democracy is important for contemporary climate action. Although the current wave of climate protests seems to share many characteristics with its 1970s predecessors, there is also a sense that contemporary movements and campaigns present a new quality in the long history of combating global warming. Are there any lessons that can be drawn from the history of environmentalism that can help us understand the current condition of climate action? I hope that by putting the environmental movement in a historical perspective, we can gain an insight into the factors that play a decisive role in effecting socio-ecological change.

Keywords: climate change, democracy, environmental movement, environmental justice

“I do not wish to seem overdramatic, but I can only conclude from the information that is available to me as Secretary-General, that the Members of the United Nations have perhaps

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ten years left in which to subordinate their ancient quarrels and launch a global partnership... to improve the human environment... If such a global partnership is not forged within the next decade, then I very much fear that the problems... will have reached such staggering proportions that they will be beyond our capacity to control.” Does this sound familiar? “Yes!” I can hear you exclaim. “This must be about the 2018 climate change report by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which found that we had twelve (now ten) years to take far-reaching and rapid action to limit global warming to 1.5°C”.

And you are right to think that the timescale and the rhetoric closely resemble our current state of knowledge and political discourse about what needs to be done to combat climate change. But you are also wrong; would you believe me if I said that the words above were spoken by U Thant, the then UN Secretary-General, over *50 years ago*, in 1969 (cited in Meadows et al., 1972: 17)? Granted, he also mentioned the Cold-War arms race and concerns about “population explosion” which I removed from the quote, but which were perceived as equally pressing and interconnected problems at the time. Although the threat of nuclear annihilation has since faded into the background, climate change is also entangled with many global challenges that people are facing today such as food crises and armed conflicts.

And yet, as U Thant’s quote would seem to confirm, there is a justified feeling that we have been here before; we have already made those arguments; we have appealed to global solidarity and cried out for urgent action to tackle global warming and stop causing irreparable damage to the Earth’s ecosystems. However, at least from a European perspective, there is also a sense that things are changing. The recent popular mobilisations in the form of climate strikes, various national movements and, importantly, community-based campaigns have raised the profile of climate action and brought it to the fore of national and international

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debate in a way that we have not seen for years. Importantly, this seems to be the case in both the core as well as on the periphery of Europe where the environment has suddenly become a topic of electoral debates.

So how do we make sense of the current moment in, what seems to be, a very long march toward tackling climate change? What is the same? What is different? How to define success and failure? And what has climate change to do with democracy?

A view from the fracking front

I remember that I first heard of frackingⁱ when I lived in Ireland, about nine years ago. I did not think for a moment that I would end up living in the vicinity of fracking pads in England, conducting ethnographic research about the impacts of gas developments on local communities. I think that it is important that I say where my observations are coming from because climate change looks a little bit differently from the perspective of a rural Lancashire or North Yorkshire community split by their views on shale gas than from the perspective of capital-based social movement organisations or policy makers.

What I found early on, when I came to live in the communities facing the prospect of fracking, was the profound sense of democratic and social injustice that was fuelled by the distrust toward the authorities, police and the gas industry (Szolucha, 2016, 2018). Regardless of their individual views on hydraulic fracturing, local residents felt alienated from the conditions of their physical environments as well as from their rights as democratic subjects. This experience stemmed from their interactions with one another as well as with the industry and various state agencies that were tasked with safeguarding the environment and people's health. The distrust settled in the communities quite quickly, at least partially prompted by the increasing corporatisation of the state and the hollowing out of its democratic function.

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Although fracking can have an impact on all local residents, it is important to note that the majority of gas developments that I have researched have taken place in areas that are overall traditionally Conservative-voting, predominantly white and middle-class. These characteristics can influence the way in which people make sense of decisions and actions that affect their lives, but I think that the popular democratic and anti-authoritarian tone of the claims made by community-based campaigns does not derive simply from their sociological characteristics but is also symptomatic of the current moment in the global struggle to tackle climate change. In outlining the similarities and differences between the current and past waves of social protest around environmental issues, I want to highlight the role that popular democratic demands play in mobilising for climate action – why are they important and why are they the only thing that really moves things forward?

Have we really been here before?

Yes, which means that, hopefully, we will have learnt something. And we did.

In the 1970s and 80s, environmentalism won much wider public support and, in the US, where it became overtly political and radical, it facilitated the creation of the Earth Day – a now-annual and global event that promotes environmental protection. It was initially modelled on anti-war teach-ins but their anti-establishment orientation soon gave way to environmental management which conceived of problems as technical and scientific rather than social, democratic or transformative (Gottlieb, 1995). The echoes of this approach can still be heard today in the way in which climate science is often elevated to the status of the “truth” that alone should be sufficient to mobilise populations and political leaders to take decisive and rapid action on climate change.

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Forty and fifty years ago, the heightened environmental awareness led to the emergence of professional organisations in which experts dealt with specific problems, often applying a conservationist lens. This relatively unthreatening form of activism helped introduce some legislative and administrative changes such as the National Environmental Protection Act of 1970 in the United States and the Control of Pollution Act 1974 in Britain. The Environmental Protection Agency was set up in the US and the Department of the Environment was established in the UK around that time as well (Sandbach, 1978). Although these developments contained popular fears, they by no means put an end to local, issue- and community-based campaigns. The Irish environmental movement was also born around this time in the context of Wood Quay and the Carnsore Point protests (Leonard, 2008).

What dominated the wave of mainstream environmentalism in the 1970s was a distinct approach – epitomised in The Club of Rome's conclusions and organisational principles – that was largely top-down, technical, expert-led and global rather than local (Eastin et al., 2011). A view from below was lacking and the democratic and anti-authoritarian impulse that undoubtedly drove a lot of environmental activism of the time, was domesticated by the promises of regulatory and expert oversight. The transformational potential that was required to make substantive changes in the way people treated the environment was spent on the creation of recycling programmes and environmental curricula in schools (Ogrodnik and Staggenborg, 2016).

Isn't this exactly where we are heading today? The top-down and expert-led approach to tackling climate change is still dominant in intergovernmental negotiations and has even been adopted by some of its critics in social movements who use it to address the powers that be and receive massive media resonance. Emission targets often remain the main reference point

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for the formal mitigation pledges and efforts. Even the distinctly global approach to the problem and the popularisation of climate change by the mass media is exactly what scholars were hailing as a new quality of the 1970s environmentalism: “What is new” they wrote “is, on the one hand, the global approach to the problem – both figuratively and literally – and, on the other hand, the popularisation of the issues by the mass media” (Kimber and Richardson, 1974: 3).

The rhetoric of ecological catastrophe propagated by such figures as Greta Thunberg or Sir David Attenborough also bears an uncanny resemblance to the ‘eco-doom’ literature that was popular in the 1970s. The tactics and methods used by some of the contemporary environmental movements and grassroots campaigns that employ high-visibility direct action rather than discrete lobbying, were also characterised as novel... 50 years ago. At the time, such environmental groups as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace distinguished themselves from the Conservation Society or the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England by undertaking more militant actions that addressed concerns pertaining to the general environmental crisis rather than single issues (Herring, 2001). Today new social movement organisations and local groups seem to be taking up the mantle of more confrontational environmentalism. Notwithstanding these historical similarities, it would be wrong to conclude that nothing has changed in the last 50 years. Popular environmental protest can teach us a lesson about why popular democratic demands are important for effecting change in many aspects of politics and society. But first, how should we think about these new, old developments in the environmental movements and popular ecological awareness?

What we are witnessing is perhaps less of a “new” type of environmentalism and more of an important moment in the evolution of the environmental movement and the history of

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climate action. These moments happen maybe once in a generation, roughly. In the 1970s, the new global environmentalism was part of an age of protest and was instrumental in the emergence of the environmental justice movement which highlighted the social bias and racism of siting decisions. Twenty years after that, anti-nuclear mobilisations in various countries in Europe and anti-road protests in Britain again led to the emergence of new ecological groups and renewed public interest in environmental problems. The 2000s in Ireland were definitely marked by the protest against the Corrib gas project in County Mayo and the jailing of the Rossport Five, which have indirectly contributed to anti-fracking resistance and a ban on the method in 2017 (Darcy and Cox, 2019). Elsewhere, global warming became one of the targets of alter-globalisation struggles that linked capitalist globalisation with international inequalities perpetuated by the extractive activities.

In 2020, we are again at a historical juncture when the cultural environmental critique has merged with scientific concerns. The expanding extraction of fossil fuels in ever more unconventional ways and places is mobilising community-based campaigns that find themselves discovering a growing environmental movement that echoes and amplifies their causes. The “new” movement is itself often informed by the recent wave of pro-democratic and anti-austerity protests such as Occupy. The ideas about direct action and direct democracy that animated those mobilisations are being creatively rediscovered as a distinctive form of anti-authoritarianism in a new reality increasingly defined by the far right.

Democracy and climate action

From the point of view of a community-based campaign in Britain – whether opposed to or in favour of fossil fuel extraction – the scope for popular democratic action has been contracting rather than expanding. When local residents decide to get involved in community activism –

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the majority of them for the first time in their lives – they enter a technocratic, political and social landscape that is largely not amenable to hearing or engaging with their concerns. The UK planning system, for example, often considers the old vocabularies of local amenity and aesthetics to be more materially significant than issues of climate change and social acceptance. The central government is happy to facilitate fracking at times when it finds it expedient and suspends the controversial practice in the runup to elections. This gives rise to popular dissatisfaction which facilitates and sustains environmental networks that people organise under to address their particular and more general concerns around climate change.

Popular discontent is instrumental in the emergence of a democratic impetus – a social and cultural force that appeals to egalitarianism and “the people” as the source and value of important political changes and actions. Popular democratic impulse embodied in community-based environmental campaigns delegitimises certain political decisions and challenges them from the position of grassroots experience and civic subjectivity. Every “new” era of environmental protest seems to be driven by this democratic impetus. It stems from outside the state and its only claim to power is that it is portrayed to articulate the democratic will of a community or society. If today, climate change is competing with other major issues on the national and international agenda, this is not because of an IPCC report or the most recent climate science; rather, it is because of the potent merging of environmental, democratic and anti-authoritarian feelings that have brought global warming to the fore again.

Over 50 years ago, Rachel Carson – the author of “*Silent Spring*”, a seminal book about the environmental impacts of pesticides – recognised that some of the pressing environmental issues of the day were indicative of “an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged” (2002: 13). A similar sentiment is also the

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mobilising force behind environmental movements and campaigns today. Although they have had 50 years to develop articulate understandings of social inequality, it is striking to read that some scholars still think about European environmentalism as “privileged fear” of those who will not have to bear the full weight of the climate crisis. And it is hard to blame them for this view because there is much more that could be done to give social inequality its proper place in the climate change debate. The current environmental moment is therefore susceptible to the same pitfalls and the same fate as its 1970s iteration. The social and economic dimensions of climate change may be lost again because they are not being put centre stage.

The environmental and climate change protests today may not signify a beginning of an entirely new environmentalism or even a culmination of five decades of ecological struggles. Everyone is speaking about climate change again because we are at a particular moment in the complex history of climate action – when environmental, democratic and anti-authoritarian concerns have come together drawing on as well as forgetting some lessons of the previous waves of popular mobilisations around environmental issues. Part of this predicament stems from the diverse roots and organisational principles of the plethora of campaigns and actors involved in tackling the climate crisis. So, as we are all learning about the possibilities of contemporary climate action, is the history of the environmental movement “a litany of small, ephemeral, and qualified victories, many of which have been further undermined in recent years” (Boime, 2008: 298)?

It is true that, in hindsight, the last 50 years of environmentalism that I sketched above can leave one with a nagging sense of disappointment at the incremental nature of climate action. On the other hand, as many local campaigners and activists would tell you, this is not how they experience their actions in real time. Is this “movement amnesia” a failure to learn within

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movements as well as between different waves of protest? Not necessarily. In fact, a sense of transgressing old boundaries and established ways of organising are essential parts of the democratic impulse that drives social mobilisation. If arguments or strategies seem novel to some of those who undertake climate action, it may simply mean that those strategies are reaching out to broader social groups.

So what are the lessons that we can draw from the last 50 years of environmental mobilisations? It seems that neither massive media interest, symbolic figures nor spectacular direct actions are a proved recipe for tackling global warming in an effective way. They are important but I would advise caution to those who think that they indicate a real social and political change. In fact, the lesson that I take from history is this: climate change, democracy and anti-authoritarianism constitute a potent formula for environmental mobilisation as long as they remain grounded in everyday life concerns and activity of social groups regardless of individual income or identity. This is why environmental justice and democracy are so important in tackling the climate crisis; they should be a way, rather than only an effect of addressing global warming. The experience of the last 50 years shows that environmental movements come and go and, although they are instrumental in effecting socio-political change, it is the democratic agency of society that gives them their impetus and legitimacy. And it seems that, in some parts of contemporary Europe, fighting for a liveable climate may need to go hand in hand with fighting for democracy.

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ⁱ Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a controversial method of shale gas extraction whereby large volumes of water with sand and chemicals are pumped underground under high pressure to crack the rock and release gas.